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**NOTES ON MODERN KOREAN FICTION**

**by Peter Hyun**

Modern Korean fiction really began with the marriage of the Korean language and the democratic ideas introduced at the turn of the century. The Korean language, which belongs to the Ural-Altaic family (i.e. Mongolian, Turkish, Hungarian and Finnish), has neither strong accent nor deep nasal tone; the sounds are mild and musical; and it is alphabetical and phonetic in spelling, whereas Chinese is ideographic.

In 1910, however, the Japanese occupied the country and converted it into a colony. Many writers were sent to prison for advocating the freedom and independence of Korea; and, especially during World War II, the use of the Korean language was prohibited. Thus our modern fiction has developed under foreign domination.

The father of modern Korean literature is Yi Kwang-su. (李光沫) A fiery man of letters, Yi Kwang-su attacked the Confucian tendency of the past and introduced instead free love, individual liberty and other revolutionary ideas. In his early story *New Dreams*, published in 1915, for instance, the hero admits:

‘I am a Korean. I’ve heard of the word love, but I’ve never experienced it. There are millions of men and women in Korea, but alas, they do not know what love is. A young man marries a girl, whose name and face and character are completely alien to him; their parents sign a marriage contract; thus they are chained to each other for life! When it comes to the question of choosing one’s lifetime mate, how can one be at the mercy of a piece of paper signed by others?’

In the next two novels, however, the influence of [page 70**]** Tolstoy an humanism and of Christo-Buddhism is evident. The hero of The Earth (흙) leaves his wealthy home and sinful city in search of a true humanity in the country. With his description of the heroine’s moral dilemmas and emotional conflicts, with his metaphysical observations of the hero’s ideas and ideals, in *The Miserable* (無情) the author justifies his reputation as the foremost critic of our culture and civilization. Besides, Yi Kwang-su invented a colloquial style of writing in fiction and in verse.

The first of March, 1919 was a black day in our history. On this day the people throughout the country held a series of passive demonstrations against Japanese rule, asking the Japanese to grant them independence.

The Japanese soldiers, however, fired on the demonstrators, and in the city of Seoul alone several thousand Koreans were killed. Soon dark clouds of doubt and pessimism loomed over our literary horizon; and, influenced by Flaubert and Zola, a school of Naturalist writers emerged. Yŏm Sang-sŏp (廉想涉) and Hyŏn Chin-gon (玄鎭健) attempted to describe our unhappy national state and its impact upon the intelligentsia in a most scientific manner. Theirs was a mixture of photographic realism and pessimistic romanticism. Yŏm Sang-sŏp’s *The Green Frog in a Laboratory* (標本室의 靑개구리) is typical of the naturalist novels of the 1920s. The hero, an intelligent young man, recalls a frog-dissecting scene at school, where his professor cuts up the frog and examines it piece by piece, after which he puts all the pieces into a bottle of alcohol The professor then turns to the students and exclaims as though he had made a great scientific discovery:

‘Now, look, all of you! The frog is still alive!’

Later the author brings a madman into the story, and after several symbolic incidents asks: ‘is there any difference between the madman and the intelligent young hero? Let us analyse this reality, this mystery!’ [page71**]**

If in temperament Yŏm Sang-sŏp is Nordic, Hyŏn Chin-gon is definitely Latin. Known as the Maupassant of Korea, Hyŏn Chin-gon is a brilliant master of short stories, which are noted for their frank, vivid evocation of sexual desires and their consequences. He uses such descriptive titles for his tales as *The Flowers of Sacrifice, Tower Without a Shadow* and *Fire* (불).

Born into a rich aristocratic family, Kim Tong-in (金 東仁) employed the Naturalist technique in his early novels. Particularly in *The Sorrows of a Weak Soul*, delving into the mental illness of the heroine, the author takes a sharp clinical approach. In his later works, however, Kim Tong-in shows his aristocratic individualism and his love of the purely aesthetic. Before his untimely death in 1951 he made a characteristic statement:

‘The element of art is egoism.’

As the aftermath of the March First Movement, a new genre of literature was born. The proletarian literature advocated protest, agitation and action. In opposition to the bourgeois tendencies of the past, Chae Su-hae, Yi Ki-yong and Han Sŏl-ya exposed the tragic lives of the peasants and the workers. Having known destitution and hunger in his youth, Chae Su-hae produced a number of bitter novels of protest. *Hunger and Massacre* is the tale of an impoverished young worker who sells himself as a slave to a doctor in order to secure medicine for his ailing wife, and who in the end turns into a reluctant but mad murderer. In contrast with the fanaticism of Chae Su-hae, however, Yi Ki-yong and Han Sŏl-ya staged a cool systematic struggle against social injustices, offering Marxism as the sole solution. Theirs was a highly persuasive attempt to lure the masses into their Communist camp; but towards the middle 1930s, when most of the leaders of the movement had been jailed, proletarian literature lost its identity. It was not until the liberation of the country by the Allies in the summer of 1945 that the proletarian writers emerged again, particularly in the North. [page 72**]**

Disillusioned with socio-political acitvities of the proletarian movement, Yu Chin-o (兪鎭午) and Yi Hyo-sŏk (李孝石) found themselves in an emotional and intellectual state of despair and of ennui. Yu Chin-o’s *Lecturer Kim and Professor T.* describes how in the face of their gloomy reality even responsible and conscientious scholars lose interest in their academic pursuits and feel nothing but the void. Yi Hyo-sŏk in his masterpiece *The Sick Rose* deals with an idealistic leader of the Young Communist League who turns into a dissipated actress. One night on the stage she ad-libs hysterically:

‘This life is killing me! This horrid fearful air chokes me! I cannot bear it. I am going mad...’

Another disillusioned novelist of the period was Chu Yo-sŏp (朱耀變), whose *The Rickshaw Man* and *The Murderer* bitterly question the ethics of religion and of society. The pastoral novelist Yi Mu-yŏng (李無影) gives a breathing space by turning to nature for solace and inspiration in his brilliant work *Longing for the Earth* whereas the historical writer Pak Chong-hwa (朴鍾和) re-creates the relics of the past in an attempt to arouse our national conscience.

In 1935 Yi Sang (李箱) experimented with the psychological novel. His was an attempt to delve freely into man’s character. The hero in *The Wings* has a prostitute-wife who supports him and all he does every day is to play with his wife’s toilet articles and to daydream. The man hasn’t any zest for life, and in one of his many idle moments he soliloquises thus:

‘I feel terribly dizzy on this fast revolving earth. The sooner I get off it, the better I will be...’

Here the man is a typical victim of the period when the Korean intelligentsia had no freedom whatsoever. His later novel *The End of Life*, as the title suggests, evokes [page 73**]** a sense of the hopelessness and meaninglessness of life under the present circumstances. Like Nathaniel West, Yi Sang died young, an embittered man, before he perfected his highly individual craft.

Yi Sang was followed by that master of lyric romanticism Hwang Sun-wŏn (黃順元), winner of the 1959 International PEN-Encounter Asian Short Story Contest; by Chong Pi-sŏk (鄭飛石), whose best known novel *The Logic of Youth* deals with the amoral and the amorous in a subtle Moravian manner; and by Kim Tong-ni, (金東里) whose world is a mixture of the real and the unreal, of the natural and the supernatural, of the ordinary and the mysterious. Kim Tong-ni takes a myth or a legend and creates a new reality based on it by working backwards, as it were, from the present to the past. In his *Muddle*, for instance, the principal character drags his exhausted body along dark path of life towards the predestined goal of Goodness. Thus myth and legend are re-created in modern times.

But alas, World War II plunged Korean literature into darkness. The use of our language was absolutely forbidden and writers were forced to write in Japanese. Many reluctant writers were tortured, whereas some were put to death.

The tragic division of the country by the Allies in 1945 and the eventual cataclysm were not conducive to the birth of a new literature. It was only several years after the truce that a young generation of avant garde writers appeared and initiated the present age of war literature. Sŏnu Hui (鮮于輝) came out with a powerful autobiographical novel, *The Flowers of Fire*. Han Mal-suk, (韓末淑), one of the most gifted young women writers, created a tragic heroine in *The Flood*, a symbolic tale of undying love among the ruins. Comparable to Celine, Son Chang-sŏp (孫昌涉) mercilessly exposes in his fast-moving tales the lust, vice and corruption in the world he knows so well—that of the downtrodden cave-dwelling beggars and thieves in Seoul. [page 74**]** The talented O Sang-wŏn, (吳尙源) at 30, has created a polished prose style of his own. Like Camus, O Sang-wŏn is concerned with the absurdity of the human condition; but he goes on to the question of what ought to be done about it. In *The Wordless Diary* the hero loses one arm in the war and returns home to find his sweetheart locked up in a mental hospital and pregnant. An insane war victim herself, she does not know who the father of the unborn child is. Her doctor claims that no medicine can cure her. The hero comes to believe that his love alone can make her well again. In one of nis moving soliloquies the hero states:

‘Only one who has suffered knows the meaning of suffering. Therefore, he alone can save himself...’